

Pacific Overtures, Part 2

Blake Neely and Geoff Zanelli conclude their discussion of collaborating with Hans Zimmer on the HBO miniseries *The Pacific*.

Interview by Tim Greiving



Blake Neely and Geoff Zanelli return for the concluding discussion of their collaboration with Hans Zimmer on *The Pacific*, the acclaimed HBO miniseries about the American-Japanese conflict in World War II.

In this installment, the composers discuss how to whittle down six to seven hours of music for an album, the pros and cons of team collaborations, and their favorite moments from the score. You can read Part 1 [here](#).

Tim Greiving: How did you guys narrow down the selections for the album?

Blake Neely: [*Laughing*] That was funny. Literally, when we heard the album was coming out, I think we just emailed each other and said, 'I'm going to pick 20 of my favorite cues.' We recorded, I think, six to seven hours of score for this. Those are various versions. I think there are four hours that actually ended up in the film, in the series. Then out of that we had to whittle that down to 72 minutes for the CD. So it was literally, 'I'm going to pick my favorite 20. You pick your favorite 20. We're going to be way long anyway, but at least that's somewhere to start.' Then it took a couple of weeks of—it was funny how we would approach each other on it—because it was like, 'I really love this cue of yours, but we gotta whittle it down...and what do you think of losing it?' and he'd go, 'Okay, I was going to say the same thing about this one.' And we finally shaved it down. There are tracks that I really wish were still on there; we even asked for a double CD set at one time, because there's so much music. There's a lot of redundancy if you listen to four hours, but there's so much music that we could put on. We purposely said we're not going to put the battle material on—there's a few battle pieces, but none of the bigger battle stuff—because we just wanted to make the album thematic. That helped get rid of a lot of music.

Geoff Zanelli: It kind of made it harder, in a way, because all of our themes, especially the ones that tell long story arcs, get played and developed in all these variations, and there's so much intricate development of a lot of these tunes that to make the album was really tricky. I might have 12 pretty good versions of what I was calling the "[Adagio for Peleliu](#)," but we can't have 12 versions on the CD; it'd be sort of silly. So which are the really keys ones, and which are the

most expressive? That's kind of how we were whittling it down.

BN: And similarly, I used "Honor," the main title theme, all throughout the series. It comes back and comes back. Geoff and I said, 'If we're starting the album and ending it with it, let's get rid of all the other uses of "Honor.'" It's hard, because you're not going to please everybody, and so we ultimately just had to say, 'Let's make a record that we like to listen to,' and then hopefully one day, if this thing's a big success, we'll get to put the 'complete' score out for the fans.

BN: And we're not discounting Hans, but I think he, after some discussions, was like, 'You guys put the album together.' So we put the album together. But another nice thing about the lack of ego on the project—when we were putting this together and we would try to reorder something, it was never like, 'Yeah, but then there's two of your tracks; that's more than my tracks.' It literally was just, 'What makes the best experience?'

GZ: [Laughing]

BN: You remember that stuff, Geoff? It's funny.

GZ: Yeah totally, we were tiptoe-ing around it...

BN: I've heard stories of collaborations where it's literally like, you would have to have this interview with someone else, because the two don't speak anymore. And they're not about to put an album out together.

GZ: No, no, no. But listen, I have to tell you, Tim, I'm really glad to hear that you liked the way the album feels as an album, because there's this little part of me that thinks, well what does it really matter what order it goes in, because people are going to grab this on iTunes, and they're going to hit shuffle, and nothing matters. But it sounds like you actually went through the experience. So at least one person listened to the way we ordered it.



Fun in the studio: Blake Neely banging out the notes.

TG: Oh yeah, I think there's a really natural flow to it. Do either of you have a personal favorite moment that you scored?

BN: I actually do. That's very easy for me because, and it's funny, way back in September after we watched the show I was just exploring ideas and themes and

sonic ideas, and I sat with this... My whole way in was I want to figure out how to get these guys home. I knew that them coming home was going to be a huge part, as you'll see, in the series, and what they had to deal with once they tried to put the war behind them and come home. I just thought that would be my way into the series. So I wrote this [long theme](#) and scored for the scene where Eugene does come home in episode 10, and actually—except for becoming a much longer piece of music—don't you think, Geoff—that's exactly how the first time we saw it is what actually appears in the movie?

GZ: I think that's right.

BN: So a favorite for me is a piece that lived from its birth all the way, without very much revision. And it was a moving piece. It was a piece that gave us a theme that we could work with a lot, and it worked. So I enjoyed doing it, and it's very emotional.

GZ: It was probably the first big success that we had to picture, I think. We had a few tunes floating around, but that was, if I remember right, one of the very first scenes that was even scored, the very last episode. I think the only revisions that were done to that cue were because of the picture edits.



Pacific Theater: Scenes from Episode 5, "Pelileu Landing."

BN: Well, it had to get longer. But that's one of my favorite sequences. That and I also loved doing when Eugene lands on Pelileu [in episode 5], when they come out of the back of the boat and go across. It's just a beautiful sequence. There's nothing music can do to screw that up. I mean, I could have really screwed it up, because that scene actually doesn't need music. I just loved scoring it.

GZ: I don't know if it doesn't need music, but it's much more heightened with music. I like that sequence a lot. If I were to touch on some of my favorite moments, I guess I thought of two as well. One of them is in episode 9 when Sledge has an encounter with an Okinawan civilian who's on her deathbed, sort of at the hands of the American border men actually. There's a really emotional connection there that he makes with her, and kind of humanizes the enemy for, really, the first time in the show. There's that one, and then there's some stuff on Peleliu where I got to develop that adagio I was talking about. A lot of that happened in episode 7. The very opening of it has that adagio, and I just really like how that piece developed Sledge's story as it gets deeper and deeper into the despair of being a soldier. Those would be my moments.

TG: I have a big question. You guys have both kind of 'cut your teeth' on the collaborative method of scoring in a lot of ways. Is that a fair assessment?

GZ: For me it is.

BN: How do you mean? It's sort of a trick question for me, because it's such a collaborative process anyway. Do you mean coming in as an orchestrator on a team, or do you mean the collaborative composing way?

TG: Specifically on projects where you are co-composing with either another person, or on a team of people. It seems like you guys have both done a good bit of that.

BN: Oh yeah, I'd definitely say I've done a good bit of it. I can't say it's my favorite way of working, because it is very difficult, for the most part. Wouldn't you say, Geoff?

GZ: Yeah...I think it depends on the...

BN: ...on the project. And the team.

GZ: In the last few years I had a lot more solo work, and I suppose I feel I enjoy that extra responsibility, if that's what you mean.

BN: Yeah.

TG: That's what I'm wondering. I'm wondering the goods and the bads of it. Because certainly there are some critics of that method, and I understand there are lots of logistical reasons for employing it.

BN: The good and the bads of it are...I'll give specific examples. Geoff and I both worked—there was a large team—on the first *Pirates of the Caribbean*. And I would say that in 30 years, if I'm still alive, I'll still look back on that as one of the funnest three months of my career. We had an absolute ball.

GZ: Three weeks. You didn't say three months, did you?

BN: Three weeks, excuse me. Which is why it was such a huge team. But we had so much fun on it. We worked our butts off, but we had so much fun and we were working on a great movie. So those are the good. If you're having a creative block or a dry spell, or you're just unsure of something you're writing, you jump out and you pull anybody on the team in and you say, 'Hey, what do you think of this?' I think that's great. The flip side of that is, when I write music I write very lonely, I mean almost with the lights out; it's just a very lonely process. So to then open yourself up to a bunch of others, saying, 'I don't like what you're doing,' it can also work the opposite way, literally shutting you down and blocking you. Those are my goods and bads.

GZ: I can sort of see that. I just actually had another really enjoyable experience like that on *Clash of the Titans* where—you probably know some of the story—it was a very similar thing to *Pirates*, where there was three weeks left to write a score from day one. I just came in and wrangled two big scenes. It was almost exactly like *Pirates*—well, to say nothing about the film [*laughing*]*—*but the process of scoring the movie was exactly like the first *Pirates*, because there were five of us. Anytime I needed another set of ears I'd pull someone in, or I'd play a rough sketch for someone, or we'd run ideas by each other. I think it's more like writing in a band, I guess, where you all have respect for each other

and you're all trying to help each other out, and no one's trying to get two percent of the other guy's royalties, and all that stuff's out the door. There are times when that can really cloud it, I think, when it feels like the competition is unhealthy. Those are the types of collaborations that I don't do anymore.



BN: Yeah, but if it is the band approach, it can really work and it can be great. You can open up creatively, and I think certain projects really benefit from it, from having various musical voices. I think *The Pacific* definitely did. And yeah, would I have loved to have sat back and said, 'I did all of *The Pacific*? It would have been very one-note sounding, and this show is not one-note. This is a project that benefited greatly. *Pirates of the Caribbean*, I think, benefited greatly, because it was so out there, you had so many things. I know you alluded to people are against the approach, but it's always been funny to me—and Geoff and I have even talked about this—but people have no problem with there being 15 people doing costumes and 30 people doing sets, but when it comes to music they get really upset if it's not one person did it by himself. I think the collaboration is helpful.



Composers' Purple Heart: Geoff Zanelli wears his medal at the ASCAP Awards.

GZ: I do too. And I have to weigh one more thought into this discussion, which has nothing to do with *The Pacific*, and nothing really to do with my career ever, and hopefully not Blake's. But I have a number of colleagues that I know who are ghostwriters for guys that you definitely know of. I used to get calls from them saying, 'My gosh, they're on the scoring stage, they're playing my cue, and I'm not even allowed to go because the director doesn't know I worked on it.'

This is a ghostwriter, and it's for a composer who 'never uses a ghostwriter.' And I don't just mean one guy; I know of a few guys. I think what actually happens is not so much that music has become more collaborative in the composing process, but that when people do collaborate, the studios will allow you to credit them, which they didn't used to. The composers are able to say, 'You know what, I just have to say that this guy helped.' If you look at it from that perspective, Hans has always been at the forefront of that battle, and he's kind of getting crucified for being one of the few honest guys, which is bizarre. I never really understand that. That said, there are plenty of composers who never have a ghostwriter, and they mean it and that's all the truth. But there are also plenty who do—and don't go to bat for their help, let's put it that way.

BN: Well, and if you're going to have a team or even just a two-composer collaboration, it is nice if everyone knows upfront because you can do things like we did on *The Pacific*, which is, 'Let's really make it sound unified. There's going to be two voices, yeah, there's going to be two approaches, but let's make it sound unified.' If you set up this, 'Let's not tell anybody, let's not do it that way.' Or even worse, and this has happened—we've been on projects like this—they didn't even tell the three composers that were hired that the other ones were hired. So I was working on something while two other guys were working on it, and then they would pick which cues they liked for each spot. That's no way to work, because then you've got this patchwork quilt of a score. So there's good and bad. For my process, the way I work I realize that I work better alone. *[Laughing]* That's a terrible thing to say. I'm quicker and everything, but I don't have as much fun as when I work with other people. I love working with other people. But then we do get to go record it with a lot of musicians. And to all of us composers, that's a big collaboration.

GZ: For sure it's part of the collaboration. It actually gets overlooked a lot of times. But sometimes big decisions get made on the scoring stage, because the cello player plays beautifully, or for whatever reason. That stuff can really, really have an impact.

TG: These are all really interesting reflections.

BN: ...that we will regret when this comes out *[Laughing]*.

TG: That will ruin your careers.

BN: *[Laughing]*

GZ: No, no, no. I can ruin my career on my own.

BN: Can we throw in a couple other things that you could file under the collaborative effort? Which is, with seven hours of music recorded, there's absolutely no way it could happen without orchestrators, and without music preparation people. We've talked about how much we appreciate the orchestra and the contractors, but there is so much music that came out that had to get put on paper and passed around to be played. And maybe because I came from being an orchestrator, I feel terrible when they don't get mentioned. We're talking about hours and hours of work, and sorting through bad mistakes that Geoff and I both made...'Are you sure that's a G-sharp?' 'Yeah I'm sure, just put it on.' I like orchestrating, but it's often the dark art that is not appreciated.

GZ: It's something that you only notice when something goes wrong, and actually we really didn't have anything go wrong with our charts on this.

BN: And we also talked about, 'I conducted, you were in the booth'—but, really, orchestration is the glue that makes all the pieces sound like they were cut from the same cloth. So we have to tip our hats to the massive orchestration team that was on this.

—FSMO

Comments regarding this interview can be sent to: tgreiving@gmail.com.